

R. S. FRENCH

THE HIGHER EDUCATION
OF THE BLIND

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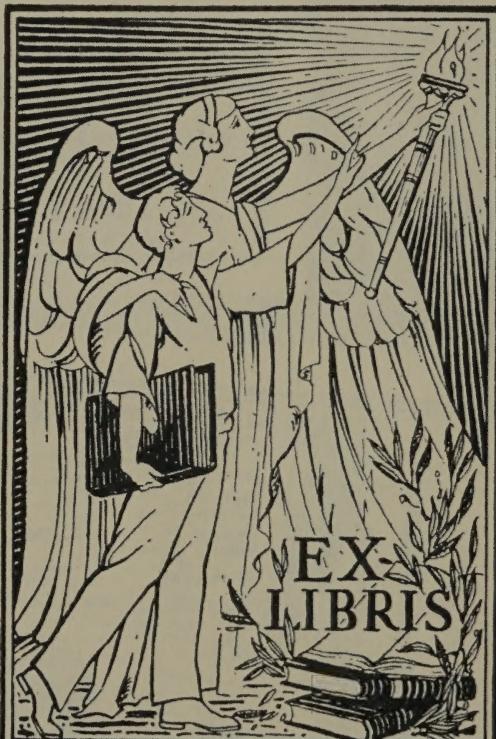
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The Higher Education of the Blind

By R. S. FRENCH, *Principal*

Any discussion of the education of the blind must at the outset concede certain limitations. There are many things that blind people cannot do at all and there are comparatively few things that blind people can do with such a degree of efficiency as would tend to put them on a par with persons of normal vision and equal mentality. In the field of handwork no one would think of training an individual for an occupation and then depriving him of his sight that he might work better. Only in the realm of the intellect and in those occupations requiring a high degree of intellectual precision can the blind, then, be conceded anything approaching par in the world of human endeavor. Even in such an occupation as typewriting, the blind person must offset rather serious handicaps by a greatly increased power of concentrated attention and by highly cultivated habits of regularity and precision. It becomes quite evident from the above considerations that it is in the world of the intellect that the blind are likely to achieve their greatest successes. Even thinking is to a great extent visual but very successful and consistent thinking can be carried on in many fields without the presence of visual imagery.

It must be conceded also that in a world taking seriously the materialistic concepts of life and education which have recently prevailed the blind would have little or no place. We are accustomed to attribute the gross materialism of the present time to the Great War. It would be more nearly correct to say that the War itself grew out of the crude philosophy, or the crude views of life entirely lacking in philosophy, which grew up in a world of increasing material prosperity but decreasing religious and other social controls. The philosophy of "get and hold," both consciously and unconsciously held, has dominated in human endeavor, especially in the commercial and industrial worlds, since long before the Great War. Such a philosophy and the ways of life growing out of it not only leave no place for the blind but they greatly restrict the possibilities for the crippled, the deaf, the aged and other groups. In a society where the handicapped exist only through the contemptuous mercy of the strong, all handicapped groups are tolerated as parasites and have practically no real place in the world's work.

Of late, however, there has been a tendency to return to the paths of idealism. While the opposite philosophy has been largely fostered by our so-called educators, there have been a few idealists, even in the field of educational measurements. It is a striking commentary on our educational thinking, however, that the alleged hard-headed business men,—manufacturers, transportation magnates, importers and capital-

ists,—have been the ones to see that cut-throat competition in the end means the self-destruction of the human race. Much of the idealism of the present comes from the field of business endeavor. Our service clubs are symptomatic of an incurable idealism which must in the long run underlie even those types of human activity most directly connected with getting and keeping. Many educators, too, begin to see the everlasting truth of the saying that "man shall not live by bread alone." Prof. Bagley has recently lifted his voice in protest against the fatalistic materialism rampant in our educational system. In his *Determinism in Education* Bagley points out convincingly that the misuse of psychology and educational measurement, as advocated by some of the more radical and determined leaders, means the death of democracy. Apparently Bagley is not alone, and it is to be hoped that the next few years will witness a return to more idealistic and liberal theories and interpretations. The blind, more perhaps than any other group, must rely upon humanism and idealism for their chance in life. A narrow interpretation of efficiency automatically excludes them from practically all places of competitive endeavor and leaves them, as indicated above, only a forlorn hope of some degree of toleration. The success of the blind depends in practically every case upon a high conception of the meaning of worth and this conception in turn rests upon the spiritual view of life, as opposed to any materialism which makes man a mere product of force and matter and consequently the mere puppet of unseeing and brutal fate.

All of which does not mean that schools for the blind and classes for the blind are to give an indiscriminately intellectualistic education. The doctrine of the talents holds in the world of spirit as well as in the world of matter and force. One cannot develop what he does not have and the mentally incompetent blind person should not be tortured and forced into a course of schooling far beyond the capacities of his mind. The psychological tests and the practical test of accomplishment must determine whether any given blind individual should have higher education or not. Individual variations within any considerable group of blind children are likely to be greater than in a like number of children in the public school selected at random. In the California School for the Blind, for instance, the variation is over sixty points on the Binet-Simon scale. This means that there are some children with at least twice the intellectual capacity of others, but even those with the lower capacity for learning ought to be given as much training as they can possibly profit by.

In this discussion of the higher education of the blind I want it to be distinctly understood that by higher is not meant college courses alone or even advanced courses in any of the higher technical fields. The mere securing of a degree is by no means a guarantee of education. On the other hand, some of the best educated blind people that I know not only have no degrees but have done little more than the earlier years of the high school by way of academic training. These same persons have, however, made the most of their abilities and have not only kept their

minds open to the reception of new ideas but have kept in close contact with the best sources of information. There is a common fallacy abroad that the mere reading of Braille books is the chief element in the education of the blind. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Reading is at best merely a tool for the acquisition of information. To be truly educated a blind person just as much as anyone else must learn to think coherently, accurately and definitely. This means not simply acquisition of well classified knowledge but the attainment of intellectual skill; the ability to deal with thoughts as a skilled technician deals with things. The world of the blind, especially the world of the totally blind, must, perchance, be rather the world of thought than the world of physical activity or the world of objective reality.

To take from the competent blind person the right to higher education is in a sense to rob him of the most precious part of his possible human heritage. At best, the objective world of the blind is highly restricted, but in the realm of abstract thought the blind person works with less handicap than in any other field. This is so eminently true that one can say without having the statement called into serious question that where the intellect can be fairly free from the trammels of objectivity the blind person can think with as great precision and as effectively as the best of thinkers with their full complement of senses. Thus, in mathematics, in philosophy and in some of the more abstract parts of science, blind men have stood preeminent in their respective fields. There are cases, too, where blind persons of unusual capacity have attained great success in fields requiring a strict objective technique, as in the case of Chicago's eminent heart specialist. In the realm of pure poetry, and even in the field of nature study, blind persons again have attained a very high degree of success. One needs only to recall the cases of Fannie Crosby, Clarence Hawkes, and the great Huber.

Objection will at once be made that such persons are extraordinary and that their cases do not justify a general higher education of the blind. The answer is that in the first place there is no danger of any general higher education of the blind for the simple reason that at least three-fourths of the blind children who attend school have not the capacity to go through such higher courses as would eventually lead to what may be truly called higher education. The second answer is that the higher education of the blind need not be academic but can be given in a number of fields where blind persons have already shown capacity for some degree of success. Thus, there is no reason why an increasingly large number should not be trained for salesmanship but there is equally no good reason why those trained for salesmanship should not have a very good general education as well as the technical training required. A third, and the most valid, answer is that the capacity of a blind person to earn his own living, even in part, is not the truest criterion of the success of higher education. There is no good reason why the blind woman, for instance, who must remain at home and have little to do other than "busy work" should not have a thorough-

going education to fit her for agreeable companionship and to enable her to fill otherwise tedious and lonesome hours with both intellectual recreation and creative thought. It appears to me that such a person, while not earning in the narrower sense of the word, may be most highly useful and a really great human asset. On the other hand, the life of the uneducated stay-at-home becomes almost inconceivably burdensome and in character, mental habits and even physically, such persons are likely to become helpless and inane. With the whole world of thought open before them, with an increasingly abundant supply of good literature, including, now, even periodicals, and with trained intelligence, the stay-at-homes can be within their narrow sphere as *successful* as those who make good honest brooms or sell pianos or adjust stray bones. At any rate, organized knowledge and disciplined mental skill are more likely to spell the intellectual and moral salvation of the blind than any other factor of which I know; not even excepting religious devotion, the importance of which I would not minimize.

We should not overlook those capable only of acquiring some small skill in a handcraft or minor trade. I am convinced of a real possibility for success for those who do the little things painstakingly, thoroughly and with a sufficient degree of speed to turn out saleable products in considerable amounts. We must realize that competition is exceedingly keen but a place will be made for the blind person of real competence in these fields providing he or she has the sticking qualities required to work up a considerable clientele and the business acumen to create new openings. In this connection I am happy to announce that the new Will C. Wood Fund, growing from the sales of Mr. Wood's new book on education in California, will be devoted to scholarships for those not going on with advanced academic courses. I trust that this will mean within a few years increased opportunities for those who want to take up advanced training in weaving, basketry, piano tuning and other occupations. If, from time to time, the principal of this fund can be increased, within a few years it ought to be possible to grant sums varying from \$50.00 to \$100.00, or more, to deserving students desiring such additional technical training.

In conclusion, I should like to call attention to the fact that whatever success the blind have achieved in the past is due to such training as may really be called higher and the greatest successes are those of persons with college training or its equivalent. Aside from those blind persons who have been successful in the education of other blind people, we find cases like those of Nicholas Saunderson and Maria von Paradies, Fawcett, Clarence Hawkes and Senator Gore, whose successes would have been impossible without a very advanced type of intellectual training. Our own school can boast an increasingly large number of graduates who have attained, either through college courses or through experience and reading, a higher education; and those persons, even though they may not be "making a living," in all cases, are at least living fuller and richer lives than would have been possible without higher education.

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